Written by **Selwyn Duke** on November 9, 2014

Hollywood Blast: Bursting Our Eardrums in a Background-noise Culture

"What did he say? Huh? Okay, well, pass the popcorn and put on the sub-titles." This is not only a common experience people have with today's entertainment; it also reflects something deeper about our culture.

It's not often that reading a *Washington Post* article makes me exclaim "Thank you. Thank you!" But that's precisely the reaction I had when imbibing a Friday piece by movie critic Ann Hornaday. Titled, in part, "How auteurs diss their audiences," it criticizes a modern film phenomenon long a pet peeve of mine: background — or, should I say, foreground and all-around — music so ear-splittingly loud one cannot hear the dialogue.

I know you've noticed this. Most everyone has. My late father, a WWII veteran with hearing somewhat damaged by reports in training and battle, complained years ago already that actors in movies would "whisper." I've been with other people who'd have to crank the volume of a movie up high so they could decipher the dialogue, and the commenters' verdict under Hornaday's article is unanimous. "I used to think I was going deaf," related one reader. Numerous others said they'd wait till they could watch a film at home so they could turn on subtitles. For my part, I'm no fan of modern movies; there's a good chance the work isn't my cup of tea if the actors weren't dead when I became alive. But I have watched enough of them to know that, despite my fairly acute hearing, I can only decipher parts of the dialogue and must fill in the blanks.

As for Hornaday, she writes that this phenomenon "exemplifies a dark side to auteurism, wherein a director insists on strong-arming his audience to the absolute brink — and sometimes beyond — of not just comfort, but coherence. All too often, the privileges of being considered a visionary translate into believing that the filmmaking fundamentals of sense, clarity and concision don't apply." She says this also reflects contempt for an audience filmmakers believe "should somehow be punished for wanting to care about the people they're watching"; moreover, she notes, this stance "is a familiar one, especially in the art-film world, where the audience is treated either with indifference, ambivalence or outright antagonism. As an independent film producer admitted last weekend at the Middleburg Film Festival, when asked what he thought the audience was for one of his films, 'I don't really think about the audience when I'm producing a film. Maybe I should.'"

But what really explains this phenomenon is hinted at by the commenter whose post I referenced earlier. He made this important observation: "I used to think I was going deaf when I couldn't understand half the dialogue on television. But then I realized that every commercial I saw during programs had perfectly clear dialogue. Unfortunately, I could hear every word."

Precisely.

When work creators have a real message they really need you to comprehend — as when your comprehension is necessary for them to make money — the dialogue is entirely intelligible. And that's the point:

Most films today have no real message.

Just as they substitute sex and violence for sublimity and virtue, they compensate for a lack of substance with an excess of sound; they, you might say, are trying to drown out their lack of a message. Another commenter under Hornaday's article, identifying himself as Robert Benjamin, put it very well (edited for punctuation, style, and typos):

> The art of writing in the entertainment industry has gone from excellent in the '40s and '50s to abhorrent now. In everything from sitcoms, where a story can't be told without extreme sexual and language dialogue, to the movies where the dialogue is so bad it's overshadowed either by sound or incompetent acting, to music and stand-up where intelligence has been replaced with the continual use of profanity. The mass audience has been so dumbed down that nothing better is expected and the industry is now catering to the lowest common denominator. Brett Baer was recently quoted as saying he really got the censors when he was able to air scenes on some inane TV show regarding "fisting" and the size of a penis, among other things. When a Hollywood executive producer's most proud moment comes from being able to air, for every child in America to see, what should be left in the bedroom of consenting adults, the industry is beyond help.

But isn't there a contradiction here? On one hand, Hornaday writes of treating the audience "either with indifference, ambivalence or outright antagonism" and quotes a producer who doesn't "really think about the audience"; on the other there are accusations that the "industry is now catering to the lowest common denominator." The explanation is that, first, Hollywood producers and directors often are part of that lowest common denominator, so they quite naturally create fodder for their ilk just by being themselves. Moreover, whether they consciously think about their audience or not, they have a certain ingrained attitude with respect to it. What might this be?

Consider that love involves thinking of others and giving them not necessarily what they want, but what they need — Truth and not titillation, virtue and not vice, information and not iniquity. Peddling corruption not only sells, however, but insofar as it comes from the heart, it reflects something else. This is often that "misery loves company"; it also can be antagonism, if not hate. Do you purposely corrupt a person you love?

And sometimes the audience is considered quite consciously. For example, the continual taking of the Lord's name in vain, so common in contemporary films, is no accident. Militant Hollywood secularists do it purposely to offend Christians.

But while modern artists do try to influence life, they also imitate it. Hornaday mentioned how "[m]any people who went to see "Gone Girl" found themselves straining to make out what Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike's characters were saying during a pivotal scene when their characters meet at a New York cocktail party." She tells us that according to director David Fincher's longtime sound designer, Ren Klyce, "Fincher purposefully broke the usual rule of upping the volume on Affleck and Pike's dialogue in the scene, the better to re-create the real-life distracting thrill and thrum of a Manhattan soiree."

While I'd suggest some artistic license was in order there, it certainly is realistic. It's common now to attend affairs where the music doesn't merely augment, it accosts. I experienced this most recently at a

wedding, but most notably at a function where I wanted to interact meaningfully with people I hadn't seen in years. No dice. The music was so oppressively loud that our "dialogue" was as unintelligible as Ben Affleck's.

So the bottom line is this: Given that many have lamented the lost art of conversation, it should surprise no one that conversation in movies is a lost art. We now live in a sound-bite culture in which people, over-stimulated with and stunted by TV, texting, and Internet since childhood, have childlike attention spans. Philosopher Blaise Pascal said years ago, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone," and now we have a study showing that some people would rather administer electric shocks to themselves than be alone with their thoughts.

And what is there to talk about, anyway? Awash in relativism and detached from Truth, many today can't truly believe in meaningful conversation because, with all matters reduced to perspective, all is meaningless. It's the phenomenon that has killed philosophy: Absent Truth, there are no answers to be found. So why engage in that search for Truth known as philosophical inquiry? It would be as insane as searching the cold depths for treasure while convinced no treasure exists.

So we avoid empty rooms, filling our spaces with sex, drugs, and violence — and noise. Perhaps this is one reason why so few today hear the voice of God.